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Caring about things in Siri Hustvedt's *The Blindfold*

[Ruth Charnock](#)

What does it mean to care about things? *The Blindfold*, Siri Hustvedt's first novel, dangles this question in a series of set-pieces, moments of glimpsing into the weirdness of the everyday, the objects that fill it and the ways in which these objects are, might, should or shouldn't be handled. *The Blindfold's* objects are animate or border on animation – a photograph breaks free of its owner and 'proliferates' throughout New York (66); a single grubby glove, lying in a box, makes a woman so anxious that she has to move it into another room before she can go to sleep (16). And the word "object" itself circulates, cryptically, in the novel; a couple at a dinner party, Jonathan and Rita, are a performance team and 'work with objects' (149); a woman, Iris, watches as her lover, Michael 'glance[s] at objects in my apartment in a way that made me think he was looking for something' (196). Objects seem to hold out a meaning in *The Blindfold* and yet they cruelly resist this meaning's extraction; the glove remains 'a stranded and empty, thing' and, later, a mirror is 'at the same time a full and empty thing, dense with images in one place, vacant in another' (33). What do these objects want? And what do we want from them?



According to [Bill Brown](#), objects only become 'thingly' to us when they stop working.

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I want to think about things in this article: what they mean, what they don't, why we want them to mean, or not, what happens when we want them to mean and they resist us. The objects I want to think about assemble at the beginning of *The Blindfold*: a single glove, a used cotton ball, and a mirror. These are everyday objects, objects that, with the exception of the mirror, have either exhausted their function (the used cotton ball) or are failing to fulfil it (the single glove). And yet these are objects that demand our attention in the novel, placed, deliberately, for us to care about them – to touch them, turn them over, look at them from all angles, listen to them, sniff them. *The Blindfold* is a novel that, in the words of [Sherry Turkle](#) 'bend[s] to the inanimate with new solicitude' (xii). But it is also a novel about what happens when one bends too far towards the inanimate, when one gets lost in objects, consumed by them, swallowed up.

At the beginning of *The Blindfold*, a man, Mr Morning, requests a research assistant. Iris Vegan, a graduate student, sees the ad and applies. When she arrives at Mr Morning's house, he tells her that he needs an assistant: "For a project about life's paraphernalia, its bits and pieces, treasures and refuse." Mr Morning has "found [himself] in possession of a number of [...] things" belonging to a girl who died three years ago. After initially having these objects, "this and that", around the apartment, he decided to box them (13). Now, because these objects are "turning cold", he wants Iris to take them home, in their boxes, one at a time, and record herself, describing the object:

"Do it at home alone. The object must be kept wrapped and in the box unless you are working. Study it. Describe it. Let it speak to you. [...] Oh yes, and you should begin your description with the words, 'This belonged to the deceased'" (16).

Mr Morning needs "someone like Iris" to "respond freely to the objects in question" (12). He tells her: "I'm in the process of prying open the very essence of the inanimate world. You might say that it's an anthropology of the present" (13).

Mr Morning wants to map out an 'anthropology of the present'. And yet, the objects of study that he wants Iris to describe are objects from the past – objects belonging to a girl who died three years ago. These are souvenirs of a life that contain meaning, or at least the promise of meaning, congealed within them, long after the woman they belonged to has passed away. The souvenir, according to Susan Stewart:

Involves the displacement of attention into the past. The souvenir is not simply an object appearing out of context, an object from the past incongruously surviving in the present; rather its function is to envelop the present within the past (151).

There's some clue here as to why Mr Morning describes his as an 'anthropology of the present'. The objects he has collected exist, as souvenirs, to undo the distance between past and present. For Mr Morning, these objects' past-lives remains present– these things are "lost,

abandoned, speechless, but not dead”. And yet, he tells Iris, his project is an urgent one: these objects are rapidly growing cold. Initially, the things “seemed charged with a kind of power. At times I almost felt them move with it”. But, after several weeks of having the dead girl’s things around his apartment, “I noticed that they seemed to lose that vivacity, seemed to retreat into their thingness. So I boxed them” (13).



'The Blindfold' is a novel about getting lost in objects, consumed by them, swallowed up.

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Recent work in ‘**thing theory**’, following from Heidegger, has distinguished between “objects” and “things”. Objects are things with meaning attached, things which signify: the chair, the apple, the hat. But, according to **Bill Brown**, objects only become ‘thingly’ to us when they stop working, when they lose their functionality for us, when they fail to signify in the way we would expect them to. Your tights develop a ladder, rendering them unwearable, the chair loses three of its legs, or, to use Brown’s examples: ‘when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy’ (4). As a term, the word ‘things’ denotes items at the edge of meaning; ‘at its most banal’, Brown muses, the ‘thing’ ‘index[es] a certain limit or liminality, to hover over the threshold between the nameable and unnameable, the figurable and unfigurative, the identifiable and unidentifiable’ (5). There are obvious correlations here with Lacan’s order of the Real – a place beyond the Symbolic, beyond signification and, thus, beyond meaning. Things, rather than objects, reside in this order. The question, with regards Mr Morning, is whether he really wants Iris to bring these things back into language, hence back into life or whether he wants her to somehow fully experience their thingness. Does Mr Morning want these things to become objects again? Or to stay as things but things animated by Iris’ handling of them? And is that animation possible within language? What kind of care is this?

Certainly, Mr Morning wants to circumscribe and police the ways in which Iris describes these objects. She must whisper her descriptions of each object into the tape recorder. The whisper, he tells her,

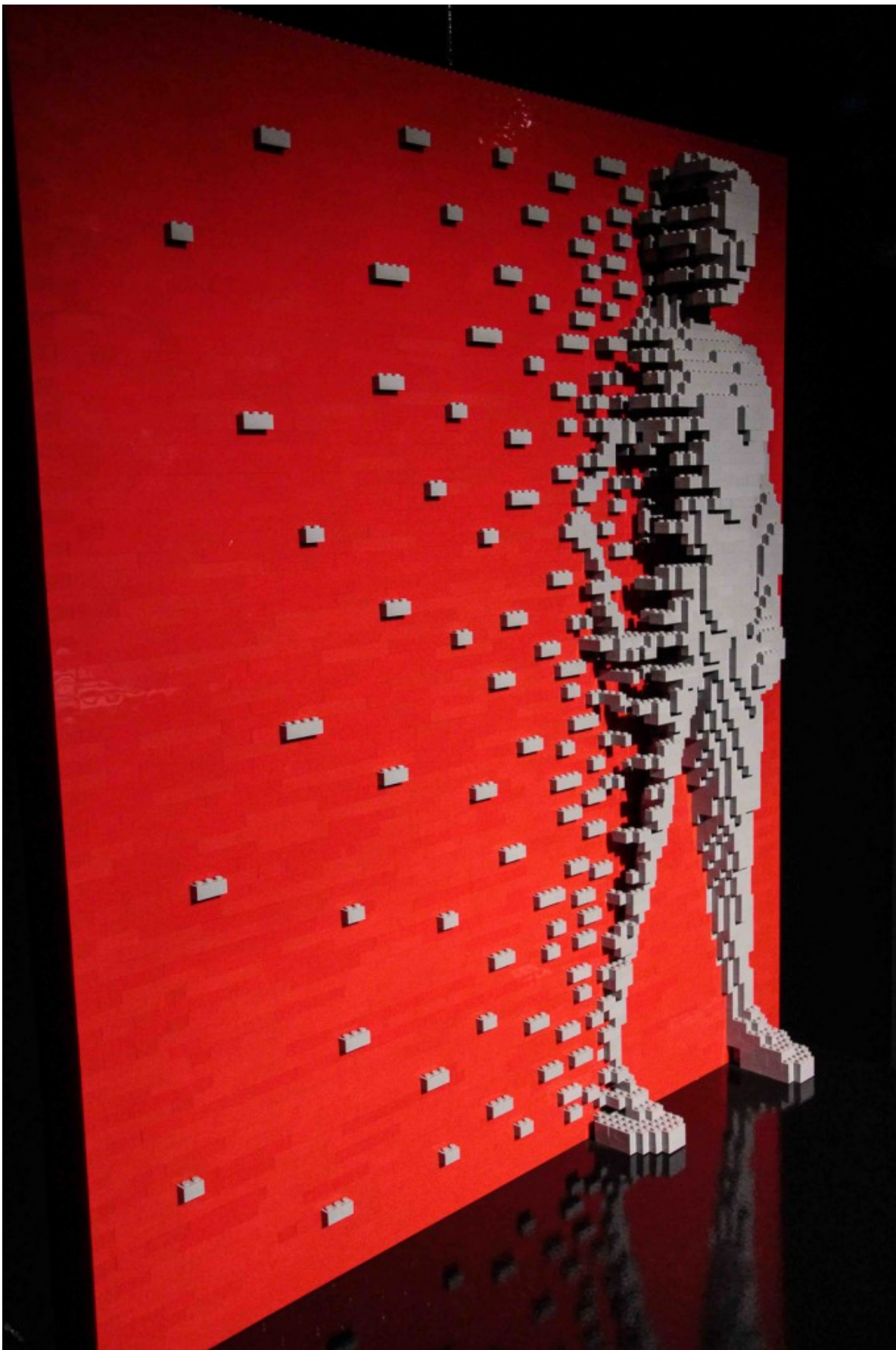
is essential, because the full human voice is too idiosyncratic, too marked with its own history. I’m looking for anonymity so the purity of the object won’t be blocked from coming through, from displaying itself in its nakedness. A whisper has no character. (15)

Mr Morning is a high modernist in the mode of Eliot, squeamish about the imprinting of the subjective onto the art object, valorising this object’s “purity”. But I’d also like to trace a perhaps unexpected move here from a modernist aesthetic of objectivity to a contemporary investment in sincerity. With this moment in *The Blindfold* and the way the novel cares towards objects more generally, we can feel the nascent stirrings of a turn towards sincerity, the new sincerity, as it has been termed, which is propelled by an urge and its frustration to grasp things ‘as they are’, to say what one means, avowedly and unadorned by any buffering, anaesthetising irony. Whilst the new sincerity has most frequently been summoned as a way to think about human relationships in contemporary American fiction, it is as apposite here. These are *sincere objects* for Mr Morning, objects that mean. However, this meaning is dependent for its “coming through” on human mediation – there needs to be a “living presence [...] to prompt an awakening”, he tells Iris (15).

In part, then, this transaction between Mr Morning and Iris is dependent on Iris’ ability to describe these objects sincerely. Fantasising about the kinds of descriptions she is going to produce, when she receives the first object, the ‘rather dirty white glove’, Iris is caught up in a dream where things *mean* essentially and where this meaning can be signified. She imagines her descriptions ‘as pithy, elegant compositions, small literary exercises based on a kind of belated nineteenth-century positivism. Just for the moment, I decided to pretend that the thing really can be captured by the word.’ (16) The fantasy here is of a perfect match between signifier and object. And yet, Iris’ fantasy of capturing the thing by the word is undone by the objects themselves which are resistant and mean beyond Iris’ ability to signify them. The glove which had seemed so promising, withholds, retains its thingness the more that Iris describes it:

The more specific I was about the glove's characteristics, the more remote it became. Rather than fixing it in the light of scientific exactitude, the abundance of details made the glove disappear. In fact, my minute description of its discolorations, snags, and pills, its loosened threads and stretched palm seemed alien to the sad little thing before me (18).

Language becomes untethered from the glove – the glove, stretched as it is, shrinks from description. One is reminded here of another moment of frustrated sincerity – in [Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*](#), where Lulu remarks to Alex: 'There are so many ways to go wrong. All we've got are metaphors, and they're never exactly right. You can never just *Say. The. Thing*' (321). Despite Mr Morning's modernist dream of the pure object, unmarked by subjective feeling or narration, it is feeling that is left as the object retreats. Trying to match words to object, turning over the phrase "woman's hand", Iris is left with nothing but a 'feeling akin to guilt' (18).



Caring about objects, one might find oneself sickened, shut out, undone, disintegrated.

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Guilt, and its close bedfellow, shame, returns again and again as Iris handles the objects that Mr Morning presents her with, one by one: the glove, the used cotton ball and the mirror. Listening back to her first recording, Iris 'blush[es] with a shame' she still doesn't 'understand' (18). Apprehending the used cotton ball, she feels 'as if I had intruded on a shameful secret, that I had seen what I should not have seen' (25). And when trying to extract from Mr Morning *why* he cares about these objects and the woman they belonged to so much, Iris is embarrassed

by the depth of Mr Morning's feeling, the fervency of his investment in his 'anthropology of the present' seems 'intimate, unseemly. I could feel the heat in my face' (28).

It is productive, here, to turn to **Silvan Tomkin's theorisation of shame** as the failure to totally inhibit one's interest. Shame, he says, 'is the incomplete reduction of interest and joy' when that interest and joy has not been reciprocated (134). These objects shame Iris precisely *because* she is so interested in them and they are not interested in her back. That is, her incursion on these objects, an incursion that is not rewarded with any revelation of meaning on the objects' part, reveals objects' profound exteriority, both to us, their presumed owners, and to meaning itself. These are objects that border on their 'thingliness'.

Throughout the novel, characters hurl themselves at objects and are undone by their interest in these objects whilst the objects remain beyond total signification, cryptic in their thingness. But there's also a sense in which the novel rewards and privileges this care towards objects – as with Mr Morning's anthropology of the present, there is an *urgency* about this care that reveals both a longing to put things and sensations into words and this project's ultimate impossibility. The novel bashes against its own desire to feel, to care – caring too much, as does Mr Morning, as does Iris, might lead to your own disintegration, whilst the objects of your affection remain intact and stubbornly out of reach. Caring about objects, one might find oneself sickened, shut out, undone, left feeling, like Iris: 'Why these things? [...] I don't know what to do with them' (35).

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